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Bradlee Tells Secrets Story, But Can't Allay the Doubts

By JAMES J. KILPATRICK

This past Sunday, The Washington Post carried a long piece by its executive editor, Ben Bradlee, detailing and justifying the Post's handling of what we know as the "Pelton story." He dealt with matters of continuing concern to both the government and the press. Forgive me a little shoptalk.

A word about Bradlee. In the fever swamps of the yahoo right, Bradlee may be the most hated editor in the nation. Among professional journalists, he is greatly respected. At 64 he has been a working newspaperman for 40 years. Since 1968 he has been the top editor of the country's most influential newspaper. Let me quote from his account:

"Some time in September, 1985, reporter Bob Woodward came into my office, shut the door, and in almost a whisper laid out an amazing top-secret intelligence capability that emerged in bits and pieces eight months later in the trial of Ronald Pelton. Woodward described in great detail how the communication intercept had worked, where the communications were intercepted, every detail except Pelton's name."

At that time Woodward did not have Pelton's name. The Post "had no knowledge that every detail of our story was already known to the Russians." Woodward and Bradlee recognized "the highest national security secret any of us had ever heard." Bradlee voiced his concern to publisher Donald Graham that truly important national-security information "was floating around town."

Pause: To this day, no one except the convicted spy and the Soviets know "every detail" of what Pelton divulged. This was a key point in the prosecution's careful preparation for trial. It is entirely possible that Woodward had picked up details that Pelton did not know or did not sell.

Bradlee talked with Gen. William Odom, head of the National Security Agency. Bradlee said confidently that the Russians had Woodward's information "and we asked why it should be kept from the American people." Odom was dismayed: "He said the information was still extremely sensitive. We didn't know exactly what the Russians knew, he said." Nevertheless, Woodward proceeded to write several drafts of his story. The final version "removed all the 'wiring diagram' details of the intelligence system." On May 28, "without the wiring diagram details," the Post ran the piece.

Meanwhile, CIA Director William Casey, Odom and the President himself had been putting pressure on the Post to kill the story. In an exceptionally stupid act, Casey implicitly threatened to prosecute the Post under espionage statutes. For a smart man, Casey can be remarkably dumb.

Further pause: It is impossible to understand how The Washington Post, given Bradlee's eloquent defense of the paper's patriotism and responsibility, could have even prepared a version that included "wiring diagram details." I have been in the news business even longer than Bradlee, and I never heard of the idea that the people have any right to know the "wiring diagram details" of "the highest national security secret." This is nonsense. Indefensible nonsense.

In his last paragraph, Bradlee set forth a principle that all journalists accept: "The press must continue its mission of publishing information that it—and it alone—determines to be in the public interest, in a useful, timely and responsible manner—serving society, not government."

Did the Post "serve society" in its handling of the story? I doubt it. As Bradlee acknowledged, the Post's editors "were not 1,000% convinced that the Soviets knew every single detail of the Post's story." The intelligence game is a game of jigsaw puzzles in which pieces are forever missing. What pieces, unknown to Woodward, were in Woodward's several versions?

What about Bob Woodward? He came to sudden fame through the leaks he and Carl Bernstein developed in the days of Watergate. In the past several years it has become evident that Woodward has access to some of the most sensitive secrets in American intelligence. He has a mole deep in the CIA or the NSA. Woodward will not identify his source; that is his obligation as a newspaperman. What is his obligation as a citizen? Here is a government employee with access to "the highest national security secret," and he is leaking "wiring diagram details" to a Post reporter.

All of us want to tell Bill Casey how to do his job, beginning with a warning to him not to tell us how to do our job. But if one word of advice to Casey is acutely justified it is this: Find Woodward's mole and take him to trial for treason.

James J. Kilpatrick writes a syndicated column.

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